

Provincializing the International: Communist Print Worlds in Colonial India

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This paper charts communist print worlds in colonial India during the interwar period. Beginning in the early 1920s, self-declared ‘Communist’ and ‘Bolshevik’ publications began surfacing across India. Through the example of the Kirti Kisan Sabha (Workers and Peasants Party: a communist group in the north-western province of Punjab), and its associated publications, this paper will provide a glimpse into the rich, diverse and imaginative print worlds of Indian communism. From 1926 onwards, *Kirti* publications became a part of a thriving print culture in which a dizzying variety of revolutionary, socialist and communist publications competed and conversed with the equally prolific and rich print worlds of their political and ideological rivals. Removed on the one hand from the ivory towers of party intellectuals, dense treatises and officious theses, and on the other hand from the framing of sedition, rebellion and fanaticism in the colonial archive, *Kirti* publications show how the global project of communist internationalism became distinctly provincialized and vernacularized in British India.

In the spring of 1926, a journal by the name of *Kirti* (The Worker) was launched in the Punjab, a north-western province of the British Raj. The statement accompanying the *Kirti*’s launch, pledged that the journal would be,

dedicated to the sacred memory of those heroes and martyrs who awakened sleeping India at a time when the value of sacrifice was far higher than it is now and whose ideal was regarded by our own people as well as by outsiders as the dream of Alnaschar. The journal will sympathize with all the workers throughout the world, the entire female sex, the subjugated weak and oppressed nations and subjugated India. [1]

The *Kirti* was an outcome of long and circuitous travels by its founder, Santokh Singh (1893–1927). Born in Singapore in 1893 to a soldier in the British Indian Army, his journeyings took him from the Punjab, where he obtained his secondary-school education, to Great Britain and the United States. [2] In the United States he joined a nascent movement by the name of Ghadar (rebellion). Founded in 1913, the Ghadar Party was an organization of Indians primarily from the North Western region of the Punjab. Composed of labourers, farmworkers, students, intellectuals and exiles, Ghadar was one of the most prominent revolutionary groups operating outside India. At a time when mainstream Indian nationalist groups in India were petitioning for greater concessions from the Raj, Ghadrates in North America were calling for its complete overthrow.

Elected as the Party Secretary, Santokh Singh was closely involved in Ghadar’s activities, not least the abortive rebellion of 1914–15. With Britain’s entry into the war, the Ghadar Party made a bid to instigate a rebellion in India. While the rebellion had little chance of success – indeed, it soon fizzled out – it did become a cherished memory for Indian revolutionaries. As part of his duties, Santokh Singh travelled to South East Asia in 1914, where he co-ordinated with German agents in an ultimately futile attempt to obtain financial and military support for the rebellion. On his return to

the United States in 1917, Santokh Singh was arrested, tried and convicted for conspiring with the German government. He was eventually released in 1919. During his incarceration, however, Santokh Singh was introduced more fully to Bolshevism and the Soviet Revolution. [3] Three years afterwards, he set sail for the Soviet Union with another comrade to attend the Fourth Congress of the Communist International.

Santokh Singh's visit was the beginning of Ghadar's relationship with the Communist International and the Soviet Union. It also marked the moment when Communist internationalism became inextricably wound up with national and regional politics in India. The groundwork for that had been laid with the founding of the Communist International in 1919 and with Lenin's express support for national liberation struggles around the world. That made the Soviet Union a mecca for revolutionaries from across the colonized world. Santokh Singh, then, was one of hundreds of Indians to pass through Moscow. After a brief sojourn in the Soviet Union, in 1923 he set off for India through Central Asia. But in his attempt to enter India through the northwest frontier, Santokh Singh was arrested and transferred to the Punjab, where he was incarcerated. Only in 1926, after the completion of his term, could he fulfil his ambition of launching a communist journal in Punjabi.

A year after the launch of the *Kirti*, the Kirti Kisan Sabha (Workers and Peasants Party) was founded by Punjabi communists and revolutionaries. The Sabha was one of the first organized communist movements in the Punjab. While Santokh Singh did not live to see its founding, his vision was nevertheless reflected in the Party's founding objectives:

1. To achieve complete independence from British imperialism by employing every possible method in order to liberate the workers and peasants from political, economic and social serfdom and to establish their united democratic power.
2. To organize the workers and peasants (for achieving this objective). [4]

With Santokh Singh's death in 1927, editorship of the *Kirti* passed into the hands of Sohan Singh Josh (1898-1982), a leading member of the Kirti Kisan Sabha and the Naujawan Bharat Sabha. [5] His trajectory into revolutionary and communist politics was very different from that of his predecessor. Josh first emerged as a political activist in the Sikh Akali movement (1920-25). This began as a campaign for *gurdwara* [6] reform. Very quickly however, it developed into full-blown agitation against the British Raj. The Akali agitation posed arguably the most serious threat to British authority in the Punjab since its annexation by the East India Company in 1849. It drew into its ranks those who had been radicalized and inspired by the Ghadar and Non-Co-operation movements, as well as those like Sohan Singh Josh who had no prior history of political activism. Josh had in fact been a government employee when he joined the Akali movement. According to an intelligence report, he was 'given the sobriquet of 'Josh' (fiery) on account of his violent speeches at Akali Diwans'. Soon after joining the movement, he was elected as a member of the Shiromani Akali Dal, a Sikh organization emerging out of the movement, and was arrested as one of the prominent Akali leaders in 1923. [7]

How did a figure emerging from a communitarian, socio-religious, political movement go on to become one of the leaders of the Punjabi communist movement? And how did that figure then join ranks with Santokh Singh, an avowed Ghadrite, roving revolutionary and ardent communist? This move may seem odd indeed if ideas and political camps are seen as hermetically sealed and ideologically purified spheres. Ideas, however, rarely work in that way. And they certainly didn't work this way in the fluid and politically charged atmosphere of the 1920s. This was a time when the meaning of 'communism' itself was far more fixed. While the understanding and politics of 'communism' underwent significant shifts over the interwar period, after the war and into the post-colonial era, in the 1920s it was significantly more dynamic and open to interpretation. There was thus little, if any, contradiction in Akali or other activists joining the ranks of avowedly socialist and

communist bodies. Indeed, a fair number of activists were formally affiliated to both 'Sikh' and 'socialist/communist' parties.

The Kirti Kisan Party, then, wove together revolutionary nationalism, communist internationalism and regional expressions of politics, together with their linguistic, social, cultural and religious registers. The best expression of this dynamic was in the *Kirti* where all these worlds came together.

The *Kirti* and its associated publications were emblematic of a moment in which ostensibly distinct political camps were fused together in political expressions that were perhaps unique to the interwar period. Whilst firmly rooted in localized contexts, their politics was profoundly internationalist in its orientation. And there's no better window into that political world, along with its tensions, utopianisms, ethics and aesthetics, than the thriving communist print cultures of the 1920s and 1930s. These archives present a marked contrast to official archives, in which revolutionaries, communists and socialists – through judicial testimonies, judgements, interrogation reports, police records, intelligence dispatches and bureaucratic memos – emerge as simple-minded ideologues driven merely by their fanatical hatred for British rule. They also stand in sharp relief against the official pronouncements, resolutions and treatises issued by the 'official' party high command through its offices in Bombay. Those texts tended to be more doctrinaire, theoretical and orthodox. My aim in this essay, then, is to explore how the political world of vernacular and provincialized communisms looked from the ground up, and few sources are better for this than their own publications.

KIRTI PRINT WORLDS

It is, perhaps, difficult to overstate the importance of print cultures to socialist, revolutionary and communist politics in British India. Publications were a crucial part of political mobilization. These publications ranged from pamphlets to novellas, biographies, published treatises, newspapers and so on. Virtually every organization that made its way into colonial records, from the right to the left, had a flagship paper or journal. That was one of the ways in which an organization claimed political standing and legitimacy. These papers or journals worked as newspapers, party mouthpieces, communiques, and as serialized novels, histories and biographies, often all rolled into one. All too frequently, they were crude productions, for many 'publishers' and 'printing houses' were one-man operations, working with little more than cyclostyle machines. Not every party had the capacity, or funds, to produce sophisticated papers. Nor could many issue daily editions. Most organizations could only afford to publish periodically: fortnightly and monthly editions were the norm. Even this, however, was extraordinary for a region with a very low literacy rate. Kirti publications voiced the concerns of a rural base, where literacy rates were even lower. There was then, a performative element in these publications, in that they were both read and read out to an audience.

Beyond low literacy rates, communist, socialist and revolutionary organizations had to face challenges that were almost unique to them. They were frequently the target of state persecution. More specifically, their papers were frequently proscribed, their publishers saddled with heavy fines and/or charged under various sections of the Indian Penal Code, and their printing apparatuses impounded. Few papers, if any, had a particularly long life, and the same was true for organizations. The Kirti Sabha itself, for example, was short-lived. It was proscribed, along with other communist organizations, in 1934, re-emerging later on other platforms and in other guises. Much the same fate befell its numerous publications. By the end of the 1940s, the Kirti group, as its members were called, had to their credit a host of journals and papers that were often successors to proscribed publications. Another function for many publications was outreach. Thus, Kirti publications were issued in Punjabi (in Gurmukhi script), Urdu and English. The *Kirti* itself had an Urdu counterpart. Other publications over the following two decades included the weekly *Mazdur Kisan* (Workers and Peasants), published in both Gurmukhi and Urdu, the *Mehnat Kash* (Worker/Labourer), *Naujawan*

Kirti Kisan (Young Workers and Peasants), *Kirti Lehar*, *Lal Dhandora*, [8] *Lal Jhanda* (Red Flag) and the *Rising Youth* and the *New Era*, both published in English. [9] Each publication, along with its associated pamphlets, political treatises, books and so on, was seen as a potential threat by the colonial administration. And taken together, Kirti publications were viewed by the intelligence services as 'the movement's most active missionaries to the peasants and working classes of the Punjab.' [10]

That was an assessment that Sohan Singh Josh would have agreed with. The *Kirti*, in his view, was not merely a 'propaganda paper'. It was, he wrote in his memoir, also 'a mobilizer and organizer' with a mission to bring workers and peasants together around class struggle. [11] Still, hopes of reaching out to 'workers and peasants' aside, it's not clear what the actual circulation of the *Kirti* was. This question became even more complicated with other Kirti publications. Short lifespans, frequent proscriptions, confiscations, police raids, arrests and changes in management (owing to arrests) meant that circulation figures were vulnerable to severe fluctuations. So it's near impossible to get a sense of approximate figures. Instead, what can be said with some certainty is that Kirti publications were meant for a variety of audiences. Other than the much vaunted 'workers and peasants', Kirti publications were directed towards trade unions, peasant groups, student associations, party workers and communist movements elsewhere in the subcontinent. This was one of the textual spaces where intra-Left debates took place. It was also where links with the Punjabi and Indian diaspora were forged and maintained. Kirti publications were regularly smuggled to revolutionary groups outside India, particularly to their Ghadar patrons. But perhaps the most important international audience was the Communist International itself. When it came to the Comintern, these publications were the most powerful confirmation that the Kirti or any other communist group could have of being the recognized representative of the toiling masses. Finally, Kirti publications were aimed at the nationalist movement itself. With searing critiques of nationalist politics, Kirti publications were targeted at the radical fringes of Indian nationalism.

This was also a view shared by Santokh Singh. In its inaugural issue, Santokh Singh gave a detailed justification of why the *Kirti* was needed. Mahatma Gandhi, he wrote, had failed to win *Swaraj* (independence) for India. Employing the *Charka* (spinning wheel) and wearing *Khadi* (homespun and woven cloth) [12] would not, he added, lead the way to *Swaraj*. [13] In making this argument, Santokh Singh was echoing a wider disenchantment with the promises, and perceived failure, of Gandhian nationalism. The abrupt end of the Non-Co-operation movement in the wake of the Chauri Chaura incident [14] was viewed as a betrayal by radical nationalists. This also explained, in part, the emergence of urban-based revolutionary groups like the Naujawan Bharat Sabha. [15]

Faced with the apparent failure of mainstream nationalism, revolutionaries like Santokh Singh responded to the intertwined oppressions of imperialism and capitalism. This was why the *Kirti* was important in his view. The first lesson the *Kirti* hoped to impart, wrote Santokh Singh, was that Hindustan like other countries would have to pay for freedom. This, he added, was the lesson of history. Hindustan could not afford to view its struggle as isolated and restricted by its geographical boundaries. Instead, Indians would have to learn from 'the sacrifices of the lovers and martyrs of freedom, irrespective of the country to which they belonged'. Indeed, in the current climate, it could hardly be otherwise. At a time when the 'reins of the world (were) coming into the hands of the working class', the labouring classes of India could ill afford to restrict themselves to their specific social, economic and political conditions. The day was not far off, he added, when:

Chinese and Siamese, on a holiday, for an afternoon excursion, will fly to Chandni Chowk in Delhi and back home. If Hindustan's *tongas* and the Chinese and Japanese human propelled rickshaws [had] not been able to prevent railway trains coming [to India] from Europe, how in the future [would] India build an iron wall around her to keep herself aloof from Europe, America and the rest of the world?

The lesson, then, was straightforward: 'the world (had) become very small'. [16] Global capitalism through imperialism had created a world where conditions in one country were necessarily linked to conditions elsewhere in the world. And by the same token, struggles in one country were inextricably linked to struggles in another. At the very least then, Indian workers could learn salutary lessons from struggles in other contexts.

For Santokh Singh, this was one of the central objectives of the *Kirti*. Another was to honour the history of Indians who had made great sacrifices in foreign countries. He specifically had in mind the travails of Ghadrites in Canada and the United States, whose sacrifices had allegedly been misrepresented and slandered by 'national leaders'. The *Kirti*, then, would 'throw some light on this forgotten page of history' such that the services of Indian revolutionaries would be 'appreciated by the nation'. [17] To that extent, then, the *Kirti*, and later the Kirti Party, was both a successor and an allied organization of the Ghadar movement. [18] Those alliances aside, the importance of highlighting and writing revolutionary histories could not be overstated for Santokh Singh and his comrades in the Kirti movement. Histories could inspire. They could also provide lessons. And they could insert revolutionaries in a national memory and struggle they were repeatedly expunged from. They belonged in this struggle as much as the nationalist leadership.

For its founders, then, the *Kirti* and its associated movement were a crucial addition to a national political conversation which was seemingly devoid of ideas. In one stroke, it sought to efface clear and hermetic distinctions between nationalism and internationalism, link the struggle against imperialism with the struggle against capitalism, and highlight forgotten chapters of revolutionary histories. And it sought to do this in a linguistic, artistic, social, cultural and religious idiom that would be familiar to its audience in the Punjab.

PROVINCIALIZING THE INTERNATIONAL

Few themes were more prominent in Kirti publications than the repeated invocation of communist internationalism and internationalist solidarity with national liberation and socialist struggles around the world. In cartoons, news reports, editorials and opinion pieces, Kirti publications expressed their internationalist alignments, and specifically their alignment with the Soviet Union. The Russian Revolution had shown that a transformative revolution was possible and that a promising future for the world's oppressed peoples was within reach. But the other reason for the *Kirti's* glowing endorsement of the Soviet Union was its link with the Communist International. The Comintern supported the Ghadar/Kirti network in material terms which included financial support and political, educational and military training for activists. [19] For that reason, the *Kirti*, much like other publications by communist trade unions and the Communist Party of India, was also aimed at the Kirti Party's interlocutors in Moscow. Besides establishing their credentials with their audience in the Punjab, the Kirtis needed equally to prove their legitimacy to their patrons in Moscow.

The January 1929 edition of the *Kirti* published an official letter ostensibly sent from Moscow by an executive member of the Krestintern (the Peasants International), an important unit of the Communist International. The letter introduced the Krestintern as an 'international organization of the revolutionary peasants of the world'. It went on to note:

We continue to hear some thing or other from our Indian brethren regarding your *Kirti* [workers] movement. We feel great pleasure when we hear that this movement is gaining ground [lit. strength] in India in general and the Punjab in particular from day to day.

After expressing his optimism about the workers' and peasants' movement in India, the writer listed the Krestintern's reservations on the revolutionary movement which relied on 'underground tactics'

instead of mass politics and expressed its 'contempt' for 'Mr. Gandhi's nonviolence'. It also offered advice on peasant organization and *jathabandi* (agitational groups) and urged the Kirtis to organize a 'very large *jathabandi* which should be in co-operation with the Krestintern and other organizations of revolutionary workers and peasants'. Their 'advice' was in keeping with the Comintern's ambition of directing communist activities across the world. Notwithstanding the limited extent to which these directives were implemented, such exchanges did signal that workers' and peasants' struggles in India were firmly linked to the global project of communist internationalism. And more than simply evidence of a Soviet led, Comintern project for global hegemony, these expressions of solidarity, advice and support can be seen as crucial for communist movements in India, which were pitted in a constant struggle against an unforgiving empire and competing political movements. For that reason, the Krestintern's support and 'blessings' for the Kirti's struggle were crucial for a nascent workers' and peasants' movement in the Punjab. [20]

That said, even these largely rhetorical expressions of support were difficult to navigate for communists in India. This letter, for example, was dated the 10th of August 1928. It had taken nearly six months from the time the letter was dispatched from Moscow to the time it was published in the Punjab in January 1929. Its receipt was a special occasion for the editors of the *Kirti*. In a note appended to the letter, the editor wrote:

Ordinarily our *dak* [post] is censored thoroughly well, and many letters and articles are also devoured by the postal department. But it is not known how the above letter has come to us escaping [their notice]. We feel astonished to receive this letter. [21]

Their astonishment was understandable. It was indeed rare for proscribed material, and specifically, correspondence from the Soviet Union, to enter India undetected. Under various ordinances and acts, India was subject to a vast censorship and surveillance regime. Those laws not only proscribed materials considered subversive or detrimental to law and order [22] - like communist, revolutionary and socialist publications - they also intercepted and confiscated suspect materials at ports of entry. To that end, every police and intelligence report contained a constantly evolving list of proscribed materials. Thus, a typical police report from 1929, the year this letter was published, noted that the papers, *Daily Worker*, *Hindustan Ghadar*, *New Republic*, *League Against Imperialism*, *Sunday Worker* and *The Worker* were intercepted by the Special Branch. [23] This was merely the tip of the iceberg, for scores of books, letters and other materials were regularly intercepted and confiscated by policing, customs and postal authorities. To make matters worse, there was a blanket prohibition on any communications emanating from blacklisted organizations, such as the Kuomintang, Pan-Asiatic League, Union of the Oppressed Peoples of the East, [24] Pan Pacific Trade Union Secretariat, Workers Welfare League of India, the Comintern, all organizations affiliated with it (such as the Krestintern) and many others. [25]

Nevertheless, proscribed materials, including the Krestintern letter published by the *Kirti*, did manage to filter into British India and the Punjab. Nor did a blanket ban on some literature, including the repeated proscriptions of communist publications, do much to keep the Kirtis and other communists from knowledge of the seemingly manic march of history in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in the world. Through their breathless reporting on events in the Soviet Union and beyond, the *Kirti* and its associated publications regularly prophesied a new world and a future that was seemingly around the corner. Case in point? A *Kirti* headline in March 1934:

The World's Glorious Future: Every Person Will Tour the World in an Airplane
Bolshevism will be the World's Only Religion! [26]

This heading, and the associated report, encapsulated the convictions of Kirtis and other communists that the Bolshevik Revolution marked a new epoch in human history. It promised a

world shorn of its decadent, old, deeply unequal and unjust past. And allied with scientific progress, the *Shakti* (power) of Bolshevism promised, with 'lightning speed', a world of 'all kinds of comfort for every human being'. Indeed, its 'spirit' haunted every nation such that the day was not far when the nations of Asia and Africa would overthrow their imperialist overlords. [27]

Much as in other communist publications, prophecy too, it seems, was a recurrent trope in *Kirti*. But so too was the conviction that India's struggle against imperialism was bound to other national liberation struggles under the spirit of internationalism, and specifically, communist internationalism. That said, this conviction was not limited to leftist politics alone. During the interwar period, there were important figures in the Congress who expressed a similar belief. Jawaharlal Nehru, amongst others, was the foremost exponent of this view. [28] As a *Kirti* *Lehar* article on 'The link between Hindustan's freedom struggle with Asia', noted in 1938, it was futile to assume that India could achieve her freedom removed from other national liberation struggles. For that reason, *Kirti* publications regularly declared their support for national liberation and class struggles across the world. From its reporting on the ongoing revolution in China, to the nationalist struggle in Ireland [29] and Afghanistan, [30] the *Kirti* Party unabashedly proclaimed its internationalist commitments and sympathies.

Alongside support for struggles elsewhere, *Kirti* publications were also aimed at an Indian audience abroad, and particularly at Indian revolutionary networks. In that, the *Kirti* differed from most political journals and newspapers in British India, for its audiences were found not only in the Soviet Union and Punjab, but also in North America and other spaces with Indian revolutionary networks. *Kirti* papers therefore memorialized the sacrifices of Ghadarite revolutionaries and their compatriots. They also addressed their diasporic readership by echoing their concerns and appealing for their support. A notice in 1931, for instance, appealed to *desh bhagats* (patriots) in foreign lands to lend their support to political prisoners in India. The notice decried the treatment accorded to political prisoners, who despite their numerous sacrifices had been forsaken and betrayed by the nationalist leadership. [31] Such appeals were frequently issued to the *Kirti*'s foreign readership. Indeed, this was one of the ways in which the *Kirtis* were linked with their Ghadarite patrons in North America. More importantly, though, it was a way in which funds were channelled to *Kirti* activists in India. Indeed, the significance of remittances from North America and migrant communities elsewhere cannot be understated. These sums enabled the *Kirtis* to function despite repeated fines, proscriptions and punitive imposition of security bonds. While the sums involved may be suspect (and were probably exaggerated by a colonial bureaucracy obsessed with tracing 'Moscow gold'), what is certain is that Indians, and especially Punjabis, around the world provided financial support to the *Kirti*. Reports of small subscriptions and donations to the *Kirtis* figured regularly in police and intelligence accounts; from, for instance, North America, Fiji, Hong Kong, Java, Uganda and Panama. [32] Occasionally, these sums were delivered via returning migrants, who sometimes came with the explicit purpose of checking whether their contributions by networks abroad were being put to effective use. [33]

It is worth pointing out that the *Kirti* and its sister publications expressed their ideas through innovative experiments in both content and form. Put differently, *Kirti* journals evolved in response to the shifting contours of communist politics in India and abroad. The *Kirti* itself reflected the heterodox and diverse worlds of its editors, in which ostensibly different political, cultural and social idioms came together in an eclectic mix of communist internationalism that was distinctly Punjabi and Indian in flavour. This was more true of its initial years than for the 1930s, when communism under Stalinism became more rigid, less flexible and more orthodox. For the ideologically doctrinaire, these early years were an embarrassing reminder of a time when their understanding of Marxism was crude and uninformed. Sohan Singh Josh, for example, thought that his earlier writings as the editor of the *Kirti* were 'loosely worded and imprecise from the Marxist point of view'. [34]

Among these early articles one from 1926 stands out: an ode to the 'lofty' status of martyrs and martyrdom. [35] With none of the usual tropes concerning workers, peasants and economic exploitation, there was little in that article that would have distinguished it from an article in an Akali publication. Much later in his life, Josh was clearly embarrassed by his unrefined Marxism. Speaking of these years, he admitted that had not 'studied Marxism' in any great depth. Nonetheless, he had started to 'proceed ahead on the road towards Marxism'. And it was on this road that he gave up 'thinking dogmatically like the religious fanatic' and became 'receptive to new ideas'. At the same time, he expressed regret that the first issue of the *Kirti* (1926) 'had come out with a Sikh religious ritual'. The 'ritual' in question was a *shabad* (hymn), accompanied by a quotation from the Guru Granth Sahib (sacred scripture of the Sikhs): 'we shall fulfil our task with our hands'. Josh considered this had been a mistake - in the midst of communal tension, it was wrong to show 'bias' in favour of the Sikh religion. [36] The tone of the *Kirti*, therefore, evolved over the years, and with it Josh's views too. While Josh himself ceased to be the *Kirti*'s editor following his imprisonment during and after the Meerut Conspiracy Case (1929-33), his successors continued to manage the journal and its associated publications in directions that echoed the shifting contours of communist thought and politics in British India.

More evocatively though, *Kirti* publications were notable for the way in which they were embedded in the social, linguistic and cultural registers of their audiences. Together, they indicate the rich and diverse ways in which communist internationalism was interpreted, translated, appropriated and created in localized contexts. To take a small, but significant, example, the *Kirti* often communicated its message through poems and songs. In a largely non-literate culture, poetry and songs were a key part of social life. For that reason, the *Kirti*, like other publications of its time, actively solicited revolutionary poems from prominent poets. Given the freshness of the *Kirti*'s ideas, Punjabi poets experimented with different poetic registers and metres. This innovation was altogether appropriate as far as Josh was concerned. As the self-proclaimed 'harbinger of a new epoch', the *Kirti* had to inaugurate new poetic forms. These ideas could not be adequately conveyed in the 'traditional' forms of literature. A similar argument was made by the renowned Progressive Writers Association. Founded in 1935-6, by Sajjad Zaheer and Mulk Raj Anand, amongst others, its manifesto called for the inauguration of a 'new literature' that would engage with the 'basic problems' of hunger, poverty, social backwardness and political subjection. [37]

In much the same way, the poetry published by the *Kirti* conveyed the pitiful state of the working classes and the promise held out by a utopian, communist, future. Announcements to that effect were also made by the *Kirti*. Thus, published poems had to include certain themes, such as a declaration of their implacable opposition to imperialism, a depiction of 'painful conditions' of workers and peasants and an expression of solidarity with them. [38] To that end, the *Kirti* also organized an *inquilabi mushaira* (a symposium for revolutionary poetry) within its pages with a declared aim of increasing the interest of its readers in its content. Quite appropriately, the first poem was called *Bolshevism ka bhoot* (the spirit or ghost of Bolshevism). [39] Irrespective of their specific content, which ranged from satirical takes to eloquent tributes to revolutionaries, *Kirti* poems were tied together in substance and style by their searing indictment of an unjust present and expressions of unbridled hope and optimism for the future. The poem *Lal Jhanda* (Red Flag) exemplified this hope in its refrain:

We Shall Unfurl the Red Flag in the West, East, North, and South
 We shall sing its songs after mounting the gallows [lit. plank of the gallows]
 It is the shroud of our corpses; its glory is high.
 Its colour makes the blood hot; wonderful in its parade [lit. going about]
 Its glare is brighter than that of a lakh of suns and moons
 When it flies flapping, it infuses great courage

Our life and death lie in it [we] shall always raise it
By freedom [we] swear that (we) shall unfurl the Red Flag over the whole world. [40]

The Red Flag provides an excellent example of how communist internationalism and its associated utopianism were interwoven in local contexts. And it was literally an expression of internationalist solidarity in another sense: the words were based on a socialist anthem written by a renowned Irish activist of the late 19th and early 20th century – Jim Connell’s The Red Flag. [41]

CONCLUSION

Writing in the *Kirti* under the *nom de plume* of ‘Balbir’, a poet spoke of the anguish a worker felt ‘at the hands of the capitalist’:

Having grown sick of sufferings undergone for centuries together and become distressed,
workers have, at last, begun to complain
The flowers [fruits] of [their] labour are enjoyed by others, [while] Workers suffer
thousands of hardships day and night
Ah? Workers carry the burden of ploughing, of toil and of labour on their shoulders
They do not get their bellyful in the evening; innumerable Workers are maintaining
patience
On the one hand, [they] are being subjected to trouble by idlers, and on the other, [they]
are suffering oppressions at the hands of Government
Oh God? We shall thank you [if] our lives are saved from the hands of the capitalist
...
At last, these times will change [and] these friends who cause [us] to weep will weep
themselves.
The days will come [when] the sword of oppression will break and fall down from the hand
of the capitalist.
O Balbir! Join together and foster unity; [your] lives will [thus] be saved from the hands of
the capitalist.
‘Balbir’ of Ferozepore [42]

This poem echoed a familiar refrain in *Kirti* publications, from their inception in the mid 1920s to decolonization. Expressed in numerous ways, this combined a lament for a deeply unjust and bleak present with a profound belief in a transformed, utopian and revolutionary future. The future it envisioned was aligned with the project of communist internationalism. But far from it being a project that was merely directed by the Soviet Union, communist internationalism in the Punjab, as elsewhere in colonial India, was lent a distinctly regional flavour together with its social, cultural and even religious, inflections. These inflections, too, were hardly ever static. Instead, they evolved over the colonial period and into the post-colonial period in ways that belied British claims – eagerly taken up by the Left’s detractors – of the essential ‘foreignness’ of communism to India. Despite their evolution and the attacks directed against them, though, what remained were the dreams associated with this politics. The *Kirti*, and its sister publications, then, are a reminder of how those dreams found fertile ground in the lifeworlds of Punjabi workers and peasants. In a time when certain ideas in both India and Pakistan are attacked, delegitimized and dismissed by reactionary, xenophobic and populist logics for their ‘foreignness’, we would do well to remind ourselves of pasts in which emancipatory projects were not limited to questions of national belonging. For that reason alone, this is a history worth telling and retelling.

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Footnotes

[1] Punjab Police Secret Abstracts of Intelligence (henceforth PPSAI) 1928, Lahore, 5 May 1926, No. 18, Supplement 1, p. 199. See also Santokh Singh's statement on what the *Kirti* was to represent in Sohan Singh Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism: an Autobiography*, New Delhi, 1991, pp 103-5.

[2] 'Santokh Singh', 'Synopsis of Case against Santokh Singh s/o Jawala Singh, village Dhader, PS Beas, District Amritsar': National Archive of India (NAI), NAI/F262/II-1923/Home Dept, p. 15.

[3] Sohan Singh Josh, *My Meetings with Bhagat Singh and on other Early Revolutionaries*, New Delhi, 1976, p. 69.

[4] 'India and Communism (Revised up to 1935)', p. 271, India Office Records (IOR), IOR/V/27/262/5. Also see Sohan Singh Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism: an Autobiography*, New Delhi, 1991, p. 118. Josh also quotes this from court papers.

[5] Founded in 1926 by the iconic Bhagat Singh and others, the Sabha was an organization of revolutionary youth disillusioned by the Indian National Congress.

[6] Akali challenged the control of the gurdwaras (and their economic resources) by a hereditary, allegedly corrupt, priesthood.

[7] *The Ghadar Directory, Containing the names of person who have taken part in the Ghadr movement in America, Europe, Africa and Afghanistan as well as in India*, compiled by the Director, Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, Government of India, 1934, pp. 270-1: IOR/V/27/262/6

[8] There is perhaps no adequate translation of *Kirti Lehar* and *Lal Dhandora*. The closest would be 'Kirti Tide' and 'Red Reverberations' respectively.

[9] PPSAI 1931, Lahore, 7 Feb., No. 6, p. 94; 'Note on the Kirti-Kisan Sabha', pp. 5-6:

IOR/L/P&J/12/300; and Lahore, 18 April, No. 16, p. 256: PPSAI 1931; and 30 May, No. 21, p. 338: PPSAI 1931, Simla-E,.

[10] 'Note on the Kirti-Kisan Sabha', p. 1: IOR/L/P&J/12/300.

[11] Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism*, p. 116.

[12] The *charkha* (spinning wheel) and *khadi* (hand woven cloth) were powerful symbols of resistance first employed and popularized by Gandhi. While the ostensible aim of homespun cloth was the boycott of cheap imported English cloth, which had spelt economic ruin for handloom weavers (a rallying cry for Indian nationalists), the *charkha* and *khadi* represented the Gandhian ideals of self-reliance and self-government.

[13] Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism*, p. 104.

[14] The Chauri Chaura incident in 1922 was one of the most iconic turning points in the Non-Co-operation movement and the history of Indian nationalism generally. At Chauri Chaura, in the Gorakhpur district of the United Provinces, a group of protestors burnt down a police station, causing the death of twenty-two policemen. For Gandhi, this spelt an egregious betrayal of his politics of non-violence. In response, he called off the Non-Co-operation movement.

[15] Founded in 1926 by the iconic Bhagat Singh (see in this issue, James Daniel Elam, 'Baghat Singh's Atheism', *History Workshop Journal* 89, spring 2020), the Naujawan Bharat Sabha, and its sister organization, the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army, were the most prominent revolutionary organizations to emerge in the interwar period.

[16] Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism*, pp. 104-5.

[17] Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism*, p. 105.

[18] Indeed, the link between the two was maintained in varying degrees well into the 1940s. Amongst The Ghadar movement abroad was an important source of funds and personnel. And much to the consternation of colonial officials, so was the Communist International in Moscow.

[19] See Ali Raza, *Revolutionary Pasts: Communist Internationalism in British India*, Cambridge, 2020, especially chaps 3 and 4.

[20] Exhibit 747-T, pp. 1-4, Meerut Conspiracy Case Papers (MCCP)

[21] Exhibit 747-T, p. 5.

[22] See Gerald Barrier, *Banned: Controversial Literature and Political Control in British India, 1907-1947*, New Delhi, for a comprehensive overview of these laws, their logics and evolution, and lists of banned literature.

[23] PPSAI 1929, Lahore, 21 Dec., No. 50, p. 769.

[24] PPSAI 1927, Departmental Notice, Lahore, 2 April, No. 16, p. 119.

[25] PPSAI 1927, Departmental Notice, Lahore, No. 56, 8 Oct., p. 437.

[26] *Kirti*, Amritsar, March 1931, p. 24.

[27] *Kirti*, Amritsar, March 1931, pp. 24-5.

[28] See Michele Louro, *Comrades against Imperialism: Nehru, India, and Interwar Internationalism*, Cambridge, 2018, especially chap. 3, 'Internationalizing Nationalism in India'.

[29] 'Ireland ki Tehreek e Azadi', *Kirti* Amritsar, March 1931, p. 37.

[30] 'Free Afghanistan', *Kirti* 1927.

[31] *Kirti* Amritsar, March 1931, p. 47.

[32] See for example, *India and Communism* 1935 p. 277: IOR/V/27/262/5, and PPSAI 1927, Lahore, 3 Dec., No. 47, pp. 611-13.

[33] PPSAI 1927, Lahore, 3 Dec., No. 47, p. 612; Exhibit 747-T.

[34] Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism*, p. 109.

[35] *Kirti*, December 1926: MCCP.

[36] Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism*, p. 109.

[37] See Manifesto of Progressive Writers Association: <http://pwa75.sapfonline.org/gpage4.html>. See also Priyamvada Gopal, *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence*, London, 2005, specifically the introduction and chap. 1; and Talat Ahmed, *Literature and Politics in the Age of Nationalism: the Progressive Writers' Movement in South Asia, 1932-56*, London, 2009.

[38] *Kirti* Amritsar, March 1931, p. 47 of 178. p. 53.

[39] *Kirti* Amritsar, March 1931, p. 49

[40] *Kirti* August 1928, Transl. in the MCCP. Josh also has a similar translation. See *My Tryst with Secularism*, pp. 114.

[41] The first couple of stanzas of which are as follows:

The people's flag is deepest red,
It shrouded oft our martyred dead,
And ere their limbs grew stiff and cold,
Their hearts' blood dyed its ev'ry fold.
Then raise the scarlet standard high.
Within its shade we'll live and die,
Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer,
We'll keep the red flag flying here. Connell wrote his anthem in 1889. It can be read, and heard, at <https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/music/lyrics/en/red-flag.htm>. The Punjabi version was written by the poet Avtar Singh Azad at the request of Sohan Singh Josh. In his introduction to the poem, Josh invited his readers to learn it by heart and recite it in meetings: p. 114. The poem and this notice appeared in the *Kirti*, August 1928.

[42] Kirti, August 1927, Transl. in the M CCP.